

A VISITOR'S PRIMER TO AZERBAIJANI CULTURE AND BLESSING

Yolun açıq olsun.

"May your road be open." Said to anyone setting out on a journey.

The customs, courtesies and everyday blessings that help a visitor to Azerbaijan hear the words, understand them, and answer well.

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Review draft. Every Azerbaijani phrase, proverb, pronunciation and custom in this edition is awaiting review by a native speaker, and the legal notes should be checked against current law. Please send corrections before sharing this edition.

Yolun açıq olsun. A free, non-commercial resource for visitors to the Republic of Azerbaijan.

INTRODUCTION

Ordinary speech, full of good wishes

In Azerbaijan, kindness is spoken as blessing. Azerbaijanis thank you by wishing you health. They praise a cook by blessing the cook's hands. They greet good news by wishing your eyes brightness, and they comfort the grieving by asking God's mercy on the one who has died.

Sağ ol

"Be healthy." Thank you.

Əlinə sağlıq

"Health to your hand." To the cook.

Gözün aydın

"May your eyes be bright." On good news.

Allah rəhmət eləsin

"May God have mercy." For one who has died.

These phrases are said dozens of times a day: at the door, at the table, at weddings and at funerals. A visitor who can't hear and return them misses much of what is being said. A visitor who can is received as someone who paid attention.

This primer is written for travelers, aid and development workers, business people, and the families who go with them.

How to use this book

- **The chapters** give you the context: what hospitality expects, how the holidays work, what happens at weddings and funerals, how to become part of a neighborhood, and what to avoid.
- **The pronunciation key** covers the ten letters that trip English speakers up. Learn these first.
- **The phrasebook** is organized by the moment you are in. Each chapter ends with the phrases it relies on.
- **The proverbs** help you follow conversation, and answering with one is a quick way to delight a host.

CHAPTER 03

Religion as Lived

Most Azerbaijanis are Muslim, but you may not see it at first. Baku looks secular: few headscarves, wine on restaurant menus, mosques that are quiet on weekdays. Faith here is often more a matter of identity, family custom and life events than of daily public ritual. Understanding that helps you avoid two opposite mistakes: assuming no one is religious, and assuming everyone is devout.

A Muslim country with a secular state

- **Shia and Sunni.** Most Azerbaijani Muslims are Shia, with a substantial Sunni minority, especially in the north. Estimates vary, but roughly two-thirds Shia is a common figure. In daily life the line between the two is rarely sharp, and people may pray in each other's mosques.
- **A secular constitution.** Religion and state are formally separate. The government oversees religious life closely through a state committee, and Muslim religious life is organized under the Caucasus Muslims Board.
- **The Soviet legacy.** For seventy years religion was discouraged and most mosques were closed. Many families kept faith through home customs rather than formal practice, and that pattern still shapes how people live.

How faith shows up day to day

- **Words.** God (*Allah*) appears constantly in ordinary speech: *Allaha şükür* ("thank God"), *İnşallah* ("if God wills"), *Allah qorusun* ("God protect"). These are as much habit as theology.
- **Life events.** Even families who never attend a mosque will usually call a mullah for a funeral and keep the mourning days. Faith is most visible at birth, marriage and death.
- **Ramadan.** Some people fast, many don't. Fasting is more common outside Baku. The evening meal that breaks the fast (*iftar*) is often shared with family and guests.
- **Variation by place.** Baku is the most secular. Some towns, such as Nardaran near Baku and parts of the south around Lankaran, are noticeably more devout. Dress and behave more conservatively there.

Folk religion

Alongside formal Islam runs a layer of older custom that most people take part in to some degree:

- **Shrines (*pir*).** Holy places, often the tomb of a revered figure or a natural site, where people light candles, tie ribbons and make requests.
- **Vows (*nəzir*).** A promise to give something (food for the poor, a sacrificed animal, a donation) if a prayer is answered.
- **The evil eye (*göz*).** The belief that envy or excessive praise can harm someone, especially a child. Blue glass beads (*göz muncuğu*) are hung in homes, cars and on babies' clothes. People may add *Maşallah* or *Allah qorusun* after praising a child, to protect them.

As a visitor, treat these customs with respect. If you praise a baby and the parent quickly adds a protective phrase, that is normal and not a rebuke.

Muharram and Ashura

Muharram is the month in which Shia Muslims mourn the death of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at Karbala in 680. The tenth day, Ashura, is the high point. Expect mourning gatherings, recitations and processions in religious neighborhoods, and a subdued mood. Weddings and celebrations are avoided during this period.

Visitors should not photograph mourners, should dress modestly near mosques, and should keep music and celebrations low-key.

Other faiths

Azerbaijan has long-established minority communities:

- **Jews:** the Mountain Jews of Qırmızı Qəsəbə (the "Red Village") near Quba, one of the oldest Jewish communities in the Caucasus, and a Jewish community in Baku.
- **Christians:** Russian Orthodox churches in Baku and other cities; the Udi people of Nij, who trace their church to ancient Caucasian Albania; Molokan villages such as Ivanovka; and small Catholic and Protestant congregations.

Azerbaijan prides itself on tolerance between these communities, and you will often hear it described as a model of coexistence.

Talking about religion

- **Expect questions.** People may ask your religion out of simple curiosity. Answer honestly and briefly.
- **Don't argue.** Comparing or debating faiths rarely goes well, and it is easy to give offense without meaning to.
- **Know the common ground.** Muslims honor Jesus (*İsa*) as a prophet and Mary (*Məryəm*) as his mother. Many hosts will mention this warmly.
- **Respect the law.** Foreign nationals may not carry out religious propaganda. See Legal and Practical Notes.

In practice

- Don't assume someone's level of practice from their dress or drinking habits.
- Use God-language blessings naturally; they are part of everyday speech.
- Dress modestly at mosques, shrines and in more devout towns. Women should cover their hair inside mosques.
- Remove your shoes in mosques and homes.
- Keep a low profile during Muharram and avoid photographing mourners.
- Answer questions about your own faith briefly and kindly, without debate.

Related phrases

- *Allaha şükür*: thank God
- *İnşallah*: if God wills
- *Allah qorusun*: God protect
- *Maşallah*: an expression of admiration that also wards off the evil eye

CHAPTER 04

Hospitality and Tea

In Azerbaijan, a guest is treated as a gift. The proverb says *Qonaq Allah qonağıdır*, "a guest is God's guest," and families take it seriously. Knowing how hospitality works lets you receive it well, and receiving it well matters as much as giving it.

The guest as a trust

A host is responsible for a guest's comfort from the moment they arrive until they leave. That is why you will be fed more than you can eat, offered the best seat, and told to sit down when you try to help. Refusing too firmly can feel like rejecting the family's care.

The key word is **Buyurun**: "please, go ahead, help yourself, come in." You will hear it at the door, at the table and every time something is offered. When you hear it, accept.

Arriving

- **Bring something.** Sweets, a cake, fruit or chocolate are always right. Flowers are welcome; give an odd number, since even numbers are for funerals.
- **Take off your shoes** at the door unless the host insists otherwise. You will usually be offered slippers.
- **Greet the eldest first.** Stand when an older person enters the room.
- **Expect to be seated** in the place of honor, usually farthest from the door. Accept it after a polite protest.

Tea

Tea (*çay*) is the center of Azerbaijani hospitality. It comes before a meal, after a meal, and often instead of one.

- It is served in small, pear-shaped glasses called **armudu**, which keep the tea hot at the bottom and cool enough to hold at the rim.
- It comes with fruit preserves (*mürəbbə*), lemon, sugar cubes and sweets. Many people take a bite of jam or sugar and sip the tea through it rather than stirring sugar in.
- Your glass will be refilled as soon as it is empty. To stop, leave a little tea in the glass, or say *Sağ olun, bəsdir* ("Thank you, that's enough").
- Teahouses (*çayxana*) are traditionally men's spaces, especially outside Baku. A foreign woman will usually be served politely, but in regional towns she may find a family restaurant more comfortable.

An old story says that when a matchmaker came to ask for a daughter's hand, the family answered with tea: served sweet, it meant yes; served without sugar, it meant no. Few families do this now, but people enjoy telling the story, and it shows how much a glass of tea can say.

At the table

- **Expect abundance.** A spread table (*süfrə*) is laid with more than the guests can eat. That is the point.
- **Accept seconds.** Hosts will press food on you. Saying no once is polite; after the second offer, accept a little more.
- **Leave a little on your plate** when you are truly full. A clean plate can be taken as a request for more.

- **Thank the cook.** At the end of the meal, say *Əlinə sağlıq* ("Health to your hand"). It is one of the most valued things a guest can say.
- **Bread is respected.** Don't put it on the floor or throw it away carelessly. People who drop bread may kiss it and touch it to their forehead.

Leaving, and returning the invitation

- Leaving takes time. Expect at least one more glass of tea after you first say you must go.
- Thank your hosts with *Çox sağ olun*. They may answer *Yenə gəlin* ("Come again"), and they mean it.
- Hospitality is a relationship. When you can, invite your hosts in return, even to a café or a simple meal.

In practice

- Say yes to tea.
- Bring sweets or fruit; give flowers in odd numbers.
- Shoes off; greet the eldest first.
- Refuse once, then accept.
- Leave a little tea in the glass and a little food on the plate when you have had enough.
- Say *Əlinə sağlıq* to the cook and *Çox sağ olun* when you leave.
- Return the invitation.

Related phrases

- *Buyurun*: please, go ahead
- *Xoş gəlmisiniz*: welcome
- *Sağ ol / Sağ olun, Çox sağ olun*: thank you
- *Nuş olsun*: enjoy your meal
- *Əlinə sağlıq*: health to your hand
- *Qonaq Allah qonağıdır*: a guest is God's guest

CHAPTER 07

Holidays and the Calendar

Azerbaijan's calendar mixes three kinds of holiday: Novruz, the ancient spring new year; the Islamic festivals, whose dates move every year; and national days, some joyful and some solemn. Holidays are when families visit, neighbors send food, and newcomers most easily become part of things. They are also when a visitor's presence is most noticed, for better or worse.

Novruz: the spring new year

Novruz is the most loved holiday in the country. It marks the spring equinox, around 20 or 21 March, and is a public holiday of several days. It is older than Islam and celebrated by nearly everyone, whatever their level of religious practice.

The four Tuesdays. The holiday is prepared for over the four Tuesdays (*çərşənbə*) before it. Each is linked to an element:

1. **Water** (*Su çərşənbəsi*)
2. **Fire** (*Od çərşənbəsi*)
3. **Wind** (*Yel çərşənbəsi*)
4. **Earth** (*Torpaq çərşənbəsi*), also called the Last Tuesday (*Axır çərşənbə*), the most festive

What you will see:

- **Bonfires.** People jump over small fires in courtyards and streets, leaving the troubles of the old year behind.
- **Səməni.** Wheat sprouts grown in a dish, tied with a red ribbon, are the centerpiece of the holiday table.
- **The xonça.** A tray of sweets, colored eggs, nuts and dried fruit, set around the səməni. The classic Novruz pastries are *şəkərbura* (crescent pastries filled with nuts), *paxlava* (layered nut pastry) and *qoğal* (spiced, flaky rolls).
- **Egg tapping.** Two people knock painted eggs together; the one whose egg doesn't crack wins.
- **Hats at the door.** On the evening of the Last Tuesday, children leave a hat or bag at a neighbor's door, knock, and hide. The neighbor fills it with sweets. Keep a supply ready.
- **Visits.** Families visit relatives, starting with elders, and exchange trays of sweets with neighbors.

As a visitor:

- **Greet everyone.** Say *Novruz bayramınız mübarək* ("Happy Novruz").
- **Keep treats by the door** for the children who come to it.
- **Return trays full.** If a neighbor sends a tray of sweets, return it with something on it, never empty.
- **Join in.** Accept invitations to jump the fire or share the table. Novruz is the easiest holiday for an outsider to join, and joining is welcomed.
- **Remember the bereaved.** Families who lost someone during the past year often receive visits before or during Novruz. If a neighbor is in their first year of mourning, a quiet visit is kind.

The Islamic festivals

Islamic holidays follow the lunar calendar, so they move about eleven days earlier each year. Check the dates for the year you are there.

Ramadan (Ramazan). The month of fasting from dawn to sunset. Some Azerbaijanis fast and many don't; fasting is more common outside Baku.

- **Be discreet.** Don't eat or drink conspicuously in front of someone who is fasting.
- **Accept iftar.** If you are invited to *iftar*, the evening meal that breaks the fast, accept. It is a warm, generous occasion.
- **Fasting greetings.** You may hear *Orucunuz qəbul olsun* ("May your fast be accepted"), said to those fasting. Receive it graciously. A simple holiday greeting is always appropriate from a visitor.

Ramazan Bayramı (Eid al-Fitr). The festival at the end of Ramadan, a public holiday. Families visit one another, give to the poor, and remember the dead.

- Say *Ramazan bayramınız mübarək*, or simply *Bayramınız mübarək*.

Qurban Bayramı (Eid al-Adha). The festival of sacrifice, also a public holiday. Families who can afford it sacrifice a sheep, and the meat is shared with relatives, neighbors and the poor.

- **Accept the meat.** A neighbor may bring you meat. Accept it with thanks; sharing it is part of the holiday.
- **Return the plate kindly.** Return the plate later with something on it.
- Greet people with *Qurban bayramınız mübarək*.

Muharram and Ashura. A period of mourning rather than celebration. See Religion as Lived.

National days

Some national days are festive, others solemn. A visitor who knows which is which avoids embarrassing mistakes.

DATE	DAY	TO NE
31 Dec and 1 Jan	World Azerbaijanis Solidarity Day; New Year	Festive. New Year is a major family celebration, with a decorated tree, gifts and a big meal
20 January	Martyrs' Day (Black January, 1990)	Solemn. Many people visit the Alley of Martyrs in Baku
26 February	Khojaly remembrance (1992)	Solemn
8 March	International Women's Day	Festive. Men give flowers and small gifts to women in their family, at work, and among neighbors
9 May	Victory over Fascism (1945)	Commemorative
28 May	Independence Day	Festive and patriotic
27 September	Remembrance Day (2020 war)	Solemn
8 November	Victory Day (2020)	Festive and patriotic
9 November	National Flag Day	Patriotic

As a visitor:

- **Women's Day matters.** On 8 March, bring flowers to women colleagues and neighbors. Men who forget are noticed.
- **New Year greetings.** Wish people *Yeni iliniz mübarək* ("Happy New Year"). New Year is when many families exchange gifts.
- **Solemn days.** Keep celebrations quiet, and don't schedule a party on them.
- **Long weekends.** Government often moves working days to create long holiday weekends, announced shortly before. Expect closures and full roads and trains.

In practice

- Learn *Bayramınız mübarək*. It works for every holiday.
- At Novruz, keep sweets by the door, and never return a tray empty.
- During Ramadan, be discreet about eating in front of those fasting, and accept invitations to *iftar*.
- Accept and share holiday food graciously.
- Know which national days are solemn.
- On 8 March, bring flowers.

Related phrases

- *Bayramınız mübarək*: happy holiday
- *Novruz bayramınız mübarək*: happy Novruz
- *Ramazan bayramınız mübarək, Qurban bayramınız mübarək*: the festival greetings
- *Yeni iliniz mübarək*: happy New Year
- *Orucunuz qəbul olsun*: may your fast be accepted (said to those fasting)

CHAPTER 08

Life Events

Births, weddings and deaths are where Azerbaijani family life is most visible and where custom is strongest. If you live in Azerbaijan for any length of time, you will be invited to a wedding and you will be expected at a mourning gathering. Knowing what happens at each lets you show up well.

Birth

- **The first forty days.** Traditionally, mother and baby stay mostly at home for the first forty days, and visits are limited to close family. Ask before visiting a newborn.
- **Protecting the child.** Blue evil-eye beads are pinned to clothing or hung over the cradle. If you praise a baby, the family may add *Maşallah* or *Allah qorusun*. Avoid excessive praise of the baby's looks.
- **What to say.** *Gözünüz aydın* ("May your eyes be bright") is the standard congratulation on a birth. A small gift of baby clothes, or money in an envelope, is welcome.

Weddings

Azerbaijani weddings (*toy*) are large, loud and joyful. Several hundred guests is normal.

The traditional sequence, which many families still follow in some form:

1. **Matchmaking (*elçilik*).** Representatives of the groom's family visit the bride's family to ask for her hand.
2. **The agreement (*söz kəsmə*).** The families agree, often over tea and sweets.
3. **The engagement (*nişan*).** Rings and gifts are exchanged at a family celebration.
4. **The henna night (*xınayaxdı*).** A celebration at the bride's home before the wedding, with henna applied to her hands.
5. **The wedding (*toy*).** Usually held in a wedding hall (*şadlıq sarayı*), with a long meal, live music, dancing and toasts.

As a guest:

- **Gift.** Cash in an envelope is the norm. Ask a local friend what amount is appropriate for your relationship to the family.
- **Dress.** Dress up. Weddings are formal.
- **Join in.** You will be pulled onto the dance floor. Join in, even briefly.
- **What to say.** *Təyiniz mübarək* ("Congratulations on your wedding"), to the couple and to both sets of parents.

Death and mourning

Death is met with strong community support and a fixed set of customs. Showing up matters more than knowing exactly what to do.

- **Burial is quick,** ideally within a day, following Islamic practice: the body is washed and wrapped, prayers are said, and men accompany it to the cemetery. Traditionally women do not attend the burial itself.
- **The mourning gathering (*yas*).** For the first days, relatives, neighbors and colleagues come to pay respects, often in a tent set up outside the home or in a mourning hall. Men and women usually sit separately. A mullah recites the Quran. Guests are served tea and halva, sit quietly for a while, then leave.

- **The memorial days.** Gatherings are held on the third day (*üçü*), the seventh day (*yeddisi*) and the fortieth day (*qırxı*), which marks the end of the main mourning period. In many families relatives also gather on Thursday evenings until the fortieth day. A gathering is held again on the anniversary (*ili*).
- **The neighborhood mourns too.** Music and celebrations nearby are avoided out of respect, and weddings in the family are postponed.

As a visitor:

- **Dress.** Dark, modest clothes. Women may be expected to cover their hair at the gathering.
- **What to say.** *Başınız sağ olsun* ("May your head be healthy"), to the family. When the person who died is mentioned, say *Allah rəhmət eləsin* ("May God have mercy on them").
- **The visit.** Keep it short and quiet. Sitting with the family for a while is the gift.
- **Repeat visits.** If you are close to the family, return for the fortieth-day gathering.

In practice

- Ask before visiting a newborn during the first forty days.
- Bring cash in an envelope to a wedding, and dance at least once.
- Go to the mourning gathering. Short and quiet is fine; staying away is what would be noticed.
- Use the set phrases. At these moments they are exactly what people expect to hear.

Related phrases

- *Gözünüz aydın*: congratulations on good news, including a birth
- *Toyunuz mübarək*: congratulations on your wedding
- *Başınız sağ olsun*: my condolences
- *Allah rəhmət eləsin*: may God have mercy (said of the deceased)
- *Allah qorusun, Maşallah*: protective phrases said over a child

CHAPTER 10

Being a Good Neighbor

Azerbaijanis say *Ev alma, qonşu al*: "Don't buy a house, buy a neighbor." Neighbors here are part of daily life. They watch each other's children, share food over the courtyard, help at weddings and funerals, and notice who is new. For a visitor, the neighborhood is the most natural way into Azerbaijani life. You don't need an introduction. You need to show up, greet people, and take part.

First impressions

People decide early whether a newcomer is respectful and friendly. Small courtesies count for a lot.

- **Introduce yourself.** When you move in, knock on your neighbors' doors with a box of sweets and introduce yourself. It is an easy, welcome gesture.
- **Greet everyone, every time.** On the stairs, in the courtyard, at the shop, say *Salam*. Greet elders first. Not greeting someone you have met reads as coldness.
- **Use names and titles.** Address people with respect:
 - *First name + xanım* for a woman (*Leyla xanım*); *first name + bəy* or *müəllim* for a man (*Elçin müəllim*). *Müəllim* means "teacher" but is used widely as a polite title.
 - Older neighbors are often called *xala* ("auntie") or *dayı / əmi* ("uncle") by younger people. Follow how others address them.
- **Dress neatly.** Appearance is noticed. Neat, modest clothing in shared spaces signals respect.
- **Mind the noise.** Keep music and noise down, especially late at night and when anyone in the building is in mourning.

Everyday neighborliness

- **Share food.** Neighbors send food back and forth: a plate of plov, holiday sweets, fruit from a family garden. When you receive a dish, **never return it empty**. Put something on it: sweets, fruit, something you cooked.
- **Ask for help.** Asking a neighbor's advice on where to buy something, how to pay a bill, or which doctor to see is a compliment. It invites a relationship.
- **Offer help.** Carry an elderly neighbor's shopping, check on someone living alone, lend tools, help when someone is moving.
- **Be a regular.** Shop at the same bakery, greengrocer and corner shop. Regular customers become acquaintances, and acquaintances become the people who invite you in.
- **Children open doors.** If you have children, they will make friends in the courtyard, and their parents will soon invite you. Let your children play with neighbors' children, and welcome them into your home.

How invitations come

Most visitors don't wait long for an invitation. The bigger question is what you do with it.

1. **The first invitation** is usually for tea. Accept it, bring something small, and follow the guidance in Hospitality and Tea.
2. **Accept early invitations**, even when you are busy. Declining several in a row can end the offers.

3. **Return the invitation.** Invite your neighbors for tea or a meal. Hospitality is a two-way relationship, and reciprocity is how you become an equal rather than a permanent guest.
4. **Show up for life events.** Being invited to a neighbor's wedding, or visiting during a death in the family, marks a deeper belonging. Go to mourning gatherings in your building or street even if you barely knew the person who died. Neighbors are expected to come.
5. **Use the holidays.** Novruz, Ramadan and the Eids, New Year and Women's Day are natural moments to visit, send a tray of sweets, or bring a small gift. See Holidays and the Calendar.
6. **Visit the sick.** If a neighbor is ill or in hospital, visit, bring fruit or juice, and say *Keçmiş olsun* ("Get well soon"). People remember who came.

Men, women and friendship

- **Same-gender friendships come first.** In most neighborhoods, friendships form between men and between women. A woman visitor will usually find it easiest to get to know the women of the building, and a man the men.
- **Handshakes.** Men visitors should let a woman offer her hand first. Many women will simply nod or put a hand on their heart.
- **Visiting.** Avoid visiting a neighbor of the opposite gender alone at home. Visit as a family or a couple.

Giving back without overgiving

Reciprocity matters a great deal, and it can be thrown off balance.

- **Match the scale.** Give gifts of about the size you receive. A very expensive gift can embarrass people who cannot return it.
- **Offer what you can do.** English conversation for a teenager, help with a computer, a skill from your work. Offer these simply, as a neighbor, not as a favor that puts anyone in your debt.
- **Receive as well as give.** Letting people help you, feed you and teach you is part of belonging. A newcomer who only gives can seem distant.

What harms a reputation

- **Not greeting people,** or seeming too busy for them.
- **Repeatedly refusing invitations or food.**
- **Being loud,** especially at night or near a home in mourning.
- **Drinking heavily in public.**
- **Gossip, or criticizing the country** or the neighbors.
- **Unmanaged contact between genders.**

In practice

- Introduce yourself to neighbors with a box of sweets.
- Say *Salam* to everyone, every time; greet elders first.
- Use *xanım*, *bəy* and *müəllim*.
- Never return a dish empty.
- Accept early invitations, and return them.
- Go to mourning gatherings and weddings when your neighbors invite you.

- Visit neighbors who are ill.
- Shop locally, and become a regular.

Related phrases

- *Salam*: hello
- *Buyurun*: please, come in, go ahead
- *Sağ olun, Çox sağ olun*: thank you
- *Keçmiş olsun*: get well soon
- *Başınız sağ olsun*: my condolences
- *Bayramınız mübarək*: happy holiday
- *Ev alma, qonşu al*: don't buy a house, buy a neighbor
- *Qonşu qonşunun külünə möhtacdır*: a neighbor needs even a neighbor's ashes; neighbors always need one another

CHAPTER 12

Sensitive Topics

Azerbaijanis are open, curious and warm with visitors, and conversation ranges widely. A few subjects, though, carry deep personal pain or real risk. On these, listen more than you speak, and don't offer opinions you would not want repeated.

Karabakh and Armenia

This is the most sensitive subject in the country, and for many families it is personal.

- **The first war (1988 to 1994).** As the Soviet Union collapsed, fighting broke out over Nagorno-Karabakh, a mainly Armenian-populated region inside Azerbaijan. By the 1994 ceasefire, Armenian forces held the region and seven surrounding districts, and several hundred thousand Azerbaijanis had been driven from their homes. Many displaced families lived in temporary housing for decades.
- **Khojaly.** On 26 February 1992, hundreds of Azerbaijani civilians were killed fleeing the town of Khojaly. The day is solemnly commemorated every year.
- **The 2020 war and after.** In the 44-day war of autumn 2020, Azerbaijan retook the surrounding districts and part of Karabakh, at a heavy cost in soldiers' lives. In September 2023 Azerbaijan took control of the whole region, and almost all of its Armenian population left for Armenia. Rebuilding and resettlement are now national priorities.
- **Martyrs.** Those killed in the wars are called *şəhid* ("martyrs"). The Alley of Martyrs (*Şəhidlər Xiyabanı*) in Baku honors them and the victims of 20 January 1990. Families who lost a son speak of it with great pride and grief.

How to handle it:

- Don't take sides, and don't argue history.
- If someone tells you their family's story, listen, and offer sympathy for their loss.
- Use the Azerbaijani names for places (for example, *Xankəndi*, not the Armenian *Stepanakert*).
- Don't raise your own travel to Armenia unprompted.
- Be aware that disputes extend to culture. Azerbaijanis and Armenians both claim some dishes, songs and carpet traditions. Don't attribute these to Armenia.

Politics and government

- **Don't criticize the leadership.** Azerbaijan has been led by the Aliyev family since 1993. Avoid criticizing the president or the government in public, on social media, or in front of people you don't know well. Some topics that are ordinary in your home country can put local friends at risk if they are seen agreeing with you.
- **Be careful with photographs.** Don't photograph government buildings, military sites, police or border areas.
- **Know the friends.** Turkey is regarded as a brother nation: "one nation, two states" (*bir millət, iki dövlət*). Relations with Russia and Iran are more complicated. Let your hosts lead on these subjects.

Religion and conversion

- **Be modest about religion.** Religious identity is closely tied to family and national identity. Changing religion can cause serious family conflict.

- **Know the law.** Foreign nationals may not carry out religious propaganda, and religious materials are regulated. See Legal and Practical Notes.
- **Answer briefly.** If someone asks about your faith, answer honestly and briefly. Don't press, compare or debate.

Personal and social topics

- **Family and marriage.** Questions about marriage, children and salary are normal small talk here. You don't have to answer in detail; a smile and a general reply are fine.
- **Gender and sexuality.** Society is conservative on gender roles and sexuality. Public displays of affection are uncommon outside Baku.
- **Comparisons.** Avoid comparing Azerbaijan unfavorably with other countries, especially its neighbors.

In practice

- On Karabakh, listen and sympathize; never argue.
- Use Azerbaijani place names.
- Don't criticize the government, aloud or online.
- Don't photograph official or military sites.
- Keep conversations about religion brief and kind.
- When in doubt, ask a local friend privately what is safe to discuss.

Related phrases

- *Allah rəhmət eləsin:* may God have mercy (said when the fallen are mentioned)
- *Başınız sağ olsun:* my condolences

CHAPTER 13

Legal and Practical Notes

This chapter is for people staying more than a short holiday: workers, volunteers, students and families. It is general information, not legal advice. Rules change, so check current requirements with the relevant authority or your employer before you travel.

Entry and registration

- **Visas.** Many nationalities can get an electronic visa online before travel. Others need a visa from an Azerbaijani embassy. Check the official requirements for your nationality.
- **Registration.** Foreigners staying beyond a short initial period must register their address with the State Migration Service. Hotels usually do this for you; if you rent privately, you or your landlord must do it. Missing the deadline can lead to a fine.
- **Longer stays.** Working legally requires a work permit, normally arranged through your employer. Longer stays need a temporary residence permit.

Religion and the law

Azerbaijan protects freedom of religion for its citizens, but regulates religious activity closely. Four points matter for visitors:

1. **Foreigners may not carry out religious propaganda.** The Law on Freedom of Religious Belief says so directly. Penalties can include fines and deportation.
2. **Religious materials are regulated.** Producing, importing or distributing religious literature, audio and video, in print or electronic form, requires state approval and a control sticker. These materials may be sold only in licensed shops.
3. **Worship happens at registered places.** Religious communities must register, and they meet at their registered address.
4. **The rules are enforced.** Authorities open cases every year for unlicensed religious activity and materials, and foreigners have been deported for it.

What this means in practice:

- **Your own faith is your own.** Practicing it privately, and attending a registered place of worship, are both normal.
- **Personal religious books.** Bring only what you need for your own use.
- **Don't distribute.** Do not hand out religious literature or recordings, or send them to people, in any format.
- **Answering questions.** If someone asks about your faith, a short, honest answer is a conversation, not propaganda.
- **Children.** Parents raise their children in their own beliefs. Don't involve other people's children in religious activity.

Photography and conduct

- **Restricted sites.** Don't photograph government buildings, military and border areas, police, or infrastructure such as oil facilities.
- **Ask first.** Ask before photographing people, especially women and elders.

- **Social media.** Posts criticizing the government can cause problems for you and for local friends who interact with them.

Practical matters

- **Money.** The currency is the manat (AZN). Cards are widely accepted in Baku; carry cash in the regions.
- **Getting around.** Baku has a metro and buses that use a rechargeable card. Use registered taxis or ride-hailing apps.
- **Dress.** Baku dress is modern and urban. Dress more conservatively in the regions and at religious sites.
- **Language.** Azerbaijani is the state language. Russian is widely understood in Baku, especially among older people. English is growing among the young. A few words of Azerbaijani open doors everywhere.
- **Health and emergencies.** Arrange health insurance before travel. Learn the local emergency numbers when you arrive.

In practice

- Check visa and registration rules for your nationality before you go.
- Register your address if you are not in a hotel.
- Get a work permit before working.
- Keep religious materials to your own personal use; never distribute them.
- Don't photograph official sites.
- Learn the phrasebook. It is the most useful thing in your luggage.

Related phrases

- *Yolun açık olsun:* may your road be open

PRONUNCIATION

Ten letters to learn first

Azerbaijani is written in a Latin alphabet and spelled the way it sounds. Most letters work as you would expect. These are the ones that trip English speakers up.

LETTER	SOUNDS LIKE	EXAMPLE
Ə	the "a" in <i>cat</i>	Əlinə sağlıq
ı	the "u" in <i>circus</i> ; a short, relaxed vowel	aydın
Ö	German <i>ö</i> ; say "e" with rounded lips	göz
Ü	German <i>ü</i> ; say "ee" with rounded lips	mübarək
Ğ	a soft sound in the throat; often just lengthens the vowel	sağ ol
Q	the "g" in <i>go</i> ; closer to "k" at the end of a word	qonaq
X	the "ch" in Scottish <i>loch</i>	xoş
C	the "j" in <i>jam</i>	olacaq
Ç	the "ch" in <i>church</i>	açıq
Ş	the "sh" in <i>ship</i>	şəfa

Stress usually falls on the last syllable. The main exception is a negative command such as *sıxma* ("don't squeeze"), where the stress moves to the syllable before the *-ma* / *-mə*.

PHRASEBOOK

Words of Blessing

Each phrase comes with how to say it, what it literally means, when it is used, and the usual reply. The note under each one tells you what to do with it:

SAY IT FREELY a phrase any visitor can use.

RECEIVE IT GRACIOUSLY you will hear it; accept it with thanks.

ANSWER THIS WAY it expects a particular reply.

Where to look

IF YOU ARE AT	SEE
Arrival and first meetings	Greetings and welcome
A home visit and tea	Home and hospitality
At the table	At the table
Weddings, good news and holidays	Celebrations
Illness and hospital visits	Health
Funerals and memorials	Loss and condolence
Work and travel	Work and travel
Someone is struggling	Words that lift
Everyday conversation	Everyday conversation

Pronunciations are English respellings, with stressed syllables in capitals. Each phrase is listed once, under its main occasion.

Greetings and welcome

Salam

sah-LAHM

LITERALLY	Peace.
MEANS	Hello. The everyday greeting, at any time of day.
WHEN	Anyone, anywhere.
REPLY	Salam

SAY IT FREELY The safe greeting for every situation.

Salam əleyküm

sah-LAHM a-ley-KÜM

LITERALLY	Peace be upon you.
MEANS	A fuller, more traditional greeting, often from older people.
WHEN	Elders, rural areas, more religious settings.
REPLY	Əleyküm salam (a-ley-KÜM sah-LAHM)

ANSWER THIS WAY Reply by reversing the words: "Əleyküm salam."

Xoş gəlmisiniz

KHOSH gal-mee-see-NEEZ

LITERALLY	You have come pleasantly.
MEANS	Welcome.
WHEN	A host greeting a guest at the door.
REPLY	Sağ olun (sah-o-LOON)

ANSWER THIS WAY A simple "Sağ olun" (thank you) is the right reply.

Thanks

Sağ ol / Sağ olun

SAH-ol / sah-o-LOON

LITERALLY	Be healthy.
MEANS	Thank you. "Sağ olun" is the polite or plural form.
WHEN	Any thanks, large or small.
REPLY	Dəyməz (day-MAZ), "It's nothing."

SAY IT FREELY Use "Sağ olun" with elders and anyone you don't know well.

Çox sağ olun

CHOKH sah-o-LOON

LITERALLY	Be very healthy.
MEANS	Thank you very much.
WHEN	Real gratitude: after a meal, a gift, real help.
REPLY	Dəyməz

SAY IT FREELY Leaving a home without it would be noticed.

At the table

Nuş olsun

NOOSH ol-SOON

LITERALLY	May it be sweet to you.
MEANS	Enjoy your meal. Said to someone eating or drinking.
WHEN	When food or tea is served, or someone finishes eating.
REPLY	Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY Your host will say it to you. Answer "Sağ ol."

Əlinə sağılıq

a-lee-NA sah-LUHG

LITERALLY	Health to your hand.
MEANS	Thank you for the food. Praise for whoever cooked.
WHEN	At the end of a meal, to the cook.
REPLY	Nuş olsun

SAY IT FREELY This is one of the most valued things a guest can say.

Health

Keçmiş olsun

kech-MEESH ol-SOON

LITERALLY	May it be past.
MEANS	Get well soon.
WHEN	To someone ill or injured, or to their family.
REPLY	Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY The everyday get-well wish.

Allah şəfa versin

al-LAH sha-FAH ver-SEEN

LITERALLY	May God give healing.
MEANS	A deeper wish for healing.
WHEN	Hospital visits; serious illness.
REPLY	Amin, sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY A prayer for healing that any visitor can sincerely say.

Loss and condolence

Allah rəhmət eləsin

al-LAH rah-MAT e-la-SEEN

LITERALLY May God have mercy.

MEANS Said of someone who has died.

WHEN Whenever the deceased is mentioned; at mourning gatherings.

REPLY Sağ olun

SAY IT FREELY Say it each time the person who died is named.

Başınız sağ olsun

bah-shuh-NUHZ SAH ol-SOON

LITERALLY May your head be healthy.

MEANS My condolences.

WHEN To the bereaved family.

REPLY Sağ olun

SAY IT FREELY The standard words of condolence. Keep the visit quiet and short.

Celebrations

Gözün aydın

gö-ZÜN ai-DUHN

LITERALLY May your eyes be bright.

MEANS Congratulations on good news: a birth, a return home, a success.

WHEN When someone shares happy family news.

REPLY Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY Use it when good news touches someone's family.

Toyunuz mübarək

to-yoo-NOOZ mü-bah-RAK

LITERALLY May your wedding be blessed.

MEANS Congratulations on the wedding.

WHEN To the couple and their families.

REPLY Sağ olun

SAY IT FREELY Say it to the parents as well as to the couple.

Bayramınız mübarək

bai-rah-muh-NUHZ mü-bah-RAK

LITERALLY	May your holiday be blessed.
MEANS	Happy holiday. Used for Novruz and the festivals.
WHEN	Holiday visits and greetings.
REPLY	Sizin də bayramınız mübarək ("Happy holiday to you too")

SAY IT FREELY For Novruz you can say "Novruz bayramınız mübarək."

Work and travel

Allah kömək olsun

al-LAH kö-MAK ol-SOON

LITERALLY	May God be a help.
MEANS	A greeting to someone at work.
WHEN	Passing someone working, entering a shop or a field.
REPLY	Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY A warm, ordinary wish that anyone can say.

Yolun açıq olsun

yo-LOON ah-CHUHG ol-SOON

LITERALLY	May your road be open.
MEANS	Have a good journey.
WHEN	To anyone leaving on a trip.
REPLY	Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY Expect to hear it every time you leave town.

Allah qorusun

al-LAH go-roo-SOON

LITERALLY	May God protect.
MEANS	God protect you or them; also said on hearing of a narrow escape.
WHEN	Children, travelers, anyone at risk.
REPLY	Amin

SAY IT FREELY Often said over children; a gentle blessing anyone can give.

Words that lift

Ürəyini sıxma

ü-ra-yee-NEE SUHKH-ma

LITERALLY	Don't squeeze your heart.
MEANS	Don't worry.
WHEN	To someone anxious or upset.
REPLY	Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY Use it with friends; it is warm and informal.

Hər şey yaxşı olacaq

HAR shey yakh-SHUH o-lah-JAHG

LITERALLY	Everything will be good.
MEANS	It will be all right.
WHEN	Comforting someone facing trouble.
REPLY	İnşallah

SAY IT FREELY Expect "İnşallah" in reply.

Sən bacararsan

san bah-jah-rar-SAN

LITERALLY	You will manage it.
MEANS	You can do it.
WHEN	Before an exam, a new job, a hard task.
REPLY	Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY Use "Siz bacararsınız" with someone older.

Halal olsun

ha-LAL ol-SOON

LITERALLY	May it be rightfully yours.
MEANS	Well done. Praise for honest effort.
WHEN	After a success, a good deed, a job well done.
REPLY	Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY High praise; it honors the person's effort as well as the result.

Səbirli ol

sa-beer-LEE ol

LITERALLY	Be patient.
MEANS	Hang in there.
WHEN	Long waits and hardship.
REPLY	Sağ ol

SAY IT FREELY Gentler when paired with "Ürəyini sıxma."

Everyday conversation

Allaha şükür

al-lah-HA shü-KÜR

LITERALLY Thanks be to God.

MEANS Fine, thank God. The usual answer to "How are you?"

WHEN All day, in every kind of conversation.

SAY IT FREELY Thanking God is common ground; most visitors say it comfortably.

İnşallah

een-shal-LAH

LITERALLY If God wills.

MEANS Hopefully. Attached to any plan for the future.

WHEN Constantly: "See you tomorrow, inşallah."

RECEIVE IT GRACIOUSLY You will hear it everywhere. Some visitors adopt it and others prefer "ümid edirəm" ("I hope").

ATALAR SÖZLƏRİ • "SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS"

Proverbs you'll hear

Azerbaijanis reach for a proverb the way others reach for an example. Knowing a few helps you follow a conversation.

Qonaq Allah qonağıdır.

"A guest is God's guest."

The root of Azerbaijani hospitality. Expect to be fed generously and refused when you try to help with the dishes.

Yaxşılıq et, at dəryaya; balıq bilməsə, Xaliq bilər.

"Do good and throw it in the sea; if the fish doesn't know, the Creator knows."

Do good without needing credit for it.

Dost dar gündə tanınar.

"A friend is known on a hard day."

Said with gratitude to someone who showed up when it mattered.

Damla-damla göl olar.

"Drop by drop, a lake forms."

Patience and small steps; often said about saving or learning.

Əkməsən, biçməzsən.

"If you don't sow, you won't reap."

Effort comes before reward.

Ağac bar verdikcə başını aşağı salar.

"The more fruit a tree bears, the lower it bows its head."

The wise and accomplished stay humble.

Ev alma, qonşu al.

"Don't buy a house, buy a neighbor."

Who lives next door matters more than the house itself.

EVERYDAY FAITH WORDS

Words you'll hear about God and faith

Faith is woven into everyday Azerbaijani speech. These are the words you will hear most, with what they mean in daily life.

Allah

al-LAH · God

The ordinary word for God in Azerbaijani, used by everyone: in blessings (*Allah qorusun*), thanks (*Allaha şükür*) and countless daily phrases.

Rəbb

RABB · Lord

A reverent word for God, heard in prayers and in phrases like *Ya Rəbb!* ("O Lord!").

Ata

ah-TAH · Father

Father. Also part of respectful words like *atalar* (forefathers), as in *atalar sözləri*, "sayings of the fathers".

İsa

ee-SAH · Jesus

Jesus is known to Azerbaijanis as *İsa*, often *İsa peyğəmbər* ("the prophet Jesus"), and Mary as *Məryəm*.

Müjdə

müzh-DA · Good news; the Gospel

Good news of any kind. Someone bringing happy news may announce *Müjdə!*, and by custom the bearer of good news receives a small gift.

İncil

een-JEEL · The Gospel (as a book)

The name Azerbaijanis know for the Christian scripture given to Jesus.

dua

doo-AH · Prayer (personal)

Personal prayer or supplication in your own words. *Dua edirəm* means "I am praying" or "I'll pray".

namaz

nah-MAHZ · Ritual prayer (Islamic)

The Islamic ritual prayer, prayed at set times with set movements. Don't walk directly in front of someone at prayer, and don't interrupt.

xeyir-dua

khey-EER doo-AH · Blessing

A blessing given, especially by parents or elders. A couple seeks their parents' *xeyir-dua* before marrying.

iman

ee-MAHN · Faith

Faith or belief. *İmanlı* means a believing, devout person.

məhəbbət / sevmək

ma-hab-BAT / sev-MAK · Love (deep love) / to love

Sevgi is everyday love; *məhəbbət* is deeper and more formal; *sevmək* is the verb "to love".

mərhəmət / rəhm

mar-ha-MAT / RAHM · Mercy, compassion

Mercy and pity. The root of the condolence blessing *Allah rəhmət eləsin*.

lütf

LÜTF · Grace, kindness, favor

A favor or kindness. *Lütfən* means "please" in formal speech.

bağışlamaq

bah-ghuhsh-lah-MAHG · To forgive

To forgive, and also to give as a gift. *Bağışlayın* means "excuse me" or "I'm sorry".

günah

gü-NAH · Sin; fault

Sin, and also blame or fault in ordinary speech: *Günah məndədir*, "It's my fault".

xilas

khee-LAHS · Rescue, salvation

Rescue or escape from danger: *xilas etmək*, to rescue.

sülh

SÜLH · Peace

Peace, often between peoples or nations; a word heard in the news.

peyğəmbər

pey-gham-BAR · Prophet

Prophet. *Peyğəmbər* alone usually means Muhammad, *Məhəmməd peyğəmbər*.

Amin

ah-MEEN · Amen

Said in response to a blessing or prayer, especially *Allah şəfa versin*.

oruc

o-ROOJ · Fasting

Fasting, above all during Ramadan: *oruc tutmaq*, to fast.
